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Editorial

This issue of Information for Social Change contains the papers given at this years ISC / Link conference. When we first started to plan this conference, we were thinking of "people without places" in quite a literal, but limited, sense. The obvious examples of people without places are the Kurds, the Polisario and, you might still argue, the Palestinians.

Then we began to think of dispossession in its wider meaning. This brought in, not only refugees, but asylum seekers, exiles and others who have been physically or spiritually dispossessed. For example, those journalists who cannot write without fear of persecution. The paper by Ahmad Ebrahimi deals with the situation in Iran. But the problem of dispossession is not confined to far off places like Iran and Africa.

The changes brought about by the collapse of communism in Europe are examined by Elena Lappin in her paper on fiction publishing in the Czech republic. Nearer to home we have the President of the Library Association, Joe Hendry, reminding us about the Highland Clearances, the destruction of working class communities and other manifestations of dispossession in Scotland. These articles come from all over the globe while addressing a global theme.

The classic portrayal of the dispossessed is that of refugees from some conflict in Africa. There have been some all too recent examples from Sierre Leone and Rwanda. At our conference Patrick Opendi gave a very moving personal account of his experiences as a Ugandan refugee. His paper should be read by politicians and civil servants *before* they draft and pass legislation like the Asylum and Immigration Act.

There is also a paper by Dick Williams of the Refugee Council, which is the main national body that deals with Refugees in the UK. Some research carried out by the British library has discovered that there is a lot of activity going on in terms of support for refugees, but this is fragmented, overlapping and may lead to duplication and inefficient use of resources.

The British Library report recommended that there should be more coordination of this work, possibly lead by the BL itself in terms of the information needs of the dispossessed. And that is why this issue is relevant to library and information workers in the UK and abroad. How can we help to plug the gaps and provide the support? What should we do when a refugee, exile or asylum seeker comes into one of our libraries seeking assistance? Hopefully, after reading these articles you will be able to answer some of these questions.

John Pateman

People Without Places

When I saw the topic for today "People without Places", I thought straightaway that the person who chose this topic already knew me and my circumstances. I became even more scared when I was asked to represent HATRAC let alone Uganda Refugee Welfare Association. The Organisation I work for is HATRAC, which stands for Hackney Training Refugee Consortium. Briefly, HATRAC consists of seven organisations which are locally based in Hackney. With the changing world, we feel it is necessary to create this consortium so as to be able to address our problems as refugees properly, especially refugee training needs. I therefore have come here wearing three hats. One for HATRAC, the other for the Ugandan Refugee Welfare Association and the last one is of myself as a refugee in this country.

This topic is a rather disturbing one and yet it is true that there are people without places. I don't mean these kinds of people you meet in the underground stations and on the streets who call themselves homeless. They maybe homeless but have places or a country where they belong. I mean the refugees and asylum seekers who were forced to leave their country of origin to travel in great length, not in search of riches, friends or good living, but just to be able to save their lives. How courageous can these people be, daring and ready to face the unknown. Each of them carries a different testimony on how they managed to escape with their lives.

I use these words deliberately because on arrival they are always asked "did you suffer persecution? or "were you ever arrested?...if so, how could you pass through the state security without them noticing you or seeing you". It is true that nobody ever believes the stories of the asylum seekers or refugees. It has always been a wonder to our hosts when they find that the stories we tell are really true. It is just like a Christian telling a non-believer that Jesus rose from the dead and went alive to heaven, having been declared dead on the cross. But how far shall we have to go so as to be believed?

We are not alone. The movement of people from one country to another has always been there, although reasons differ. In the refugee case they have no choice, given no time to prepare, no time to say goodbye to their loved ones - if they are alive. Refugees are people who travel from one place to another, never belonging. Let me say something about the recent past, and try to reason why and how I found myself in the UK. I want to take you back 50 years and give you time to examine for yourselves how people like me and some of you here present came to be people without places. I am going to accuse nobody, because as a refugee I was already sentenced to being a man without a place on my arrival at Heathrow airport. I call this double standards.

Africans were used as a tool to win the second world war. They were called allies. Today when the very same people come to the country they defended, they are called bogus asylum seekers or refugees. The 1951 Geneva Convention saw and recognised the issues of refugees as people who needed political protection from another country. Who signed the convention at this time? They are the same European countries who now want it to change. Most African countries were not even dreaming of gaining independence from those very Geneva Convention signatories.

The creation of the UNHCR was necessary and for sure we have one up to today. Now I want to ask is this post still relevant to today's present circumstances or not? If yes, why not then change the move to UNH for asylum seekers and bogus refugees? In my opinion there is no longer the issue of refugees in Europe, except that of asylum seekers. I am also aware that government consultations are going on in Europe for the word "refugee" to be replaced by the term "Temporary Protection for three years" This is coming about because there are no more refugees in the region that determines who to call what. The European Parliament is working hard to see that these former allies can no longer come here.

I want you to imagine two people arriving at Heathrow Airport. One is Ugandan and the other is German. Whom do you think shall be allowed to pass through the immigration checks without questions like "what have you come here for?", "How much money do you have?" "How long do you intend staying here?" "What do you have in your bag?" "Do you know anyone in this country and in what capacity?" I am not going to answer these questions because you know the answers. This is only happening after a period of less than 50 years after the second world war. Do we forget so soon? The old English saying is that a friend in need is a friend indeed. Ladies and Gentlemen, let me try to discuss with you the cause of the present refugee, call it asylum seeking if you please, and that is Mr Free Market.

Most of you are aware what has been happening in East and Central Africa in the last four decades, whereby African dictators have been replaced by other dictators - Uganda, Rwanda and the former Zaire, now Congo, to mention a few. Mr Free Market has visited those places by selling them arms. Instead of books - Africa is suffering from illiteracy - they are sold arms. I want to call on Mr Free Market to sell more books to those African Rulers in order to understand the rule of the law and not of the gun. Let Mr Free Market open more libraries in those countries so that people who yearn for knowledge may find it easily at their doorsteps. We need more books in Africa, and we need to burn the weapons which destroy instead of developing us.

It is now 10 years since I left my country. Since 1987 there have been persistent armed opposition to the present regime coming from the east, north-east and north. I wonder if Mr Free Market had taken books there, would these kind of useless wars have continued up to now? Many people have been killed or displaced. Many children have lost the chance of going to school because their parents are at war.

So much illiteracy has been added to these unfortunate children who know nothing about reading or education. The only thing they know and understand is the might of the gun. Imagine you visit a country and when you ask where is the public library, you are asked "what library?". The only one we know is at the university. People have always associated libraries with institutes of higher learning. In my country I am not aware of more than five libraries. Some schools are just struggling to establish one with a high degree of difficulty, but it is usually left to individuals to buy their own books if they need any.

Thus I am calling on Mr Free Market to take books there. I do strongly believe he will make more money selling books than arms. Education and knowledge keep on changing and there is a great need to address these changes. If Mr Free Market is to continue with his business he must create a way of communicating with his buyers or market. This can only come about when education is first on his agenda.

Having said those nice things about double standards and Mr Free Market, let me give a little touch of my personal experience as a man without a place. It may be sad but it is the truth. The last person I said goodbye to before boarding a plane to the UK was my first daughter Irene. These were the words between us : "Irene, I am going away from this country to England because you have seen how the security men are hunting for me and what happened to you the last time they came for me". She was forced to have sex with them because they believed she knew where I was. I held her hands and asked her to behave because I was sure that one day God would unite us as a family. She answered "Dad, as long as you are alive I will do all I can to behave. I then left the country. I never saw my other eight children, it was impossible.

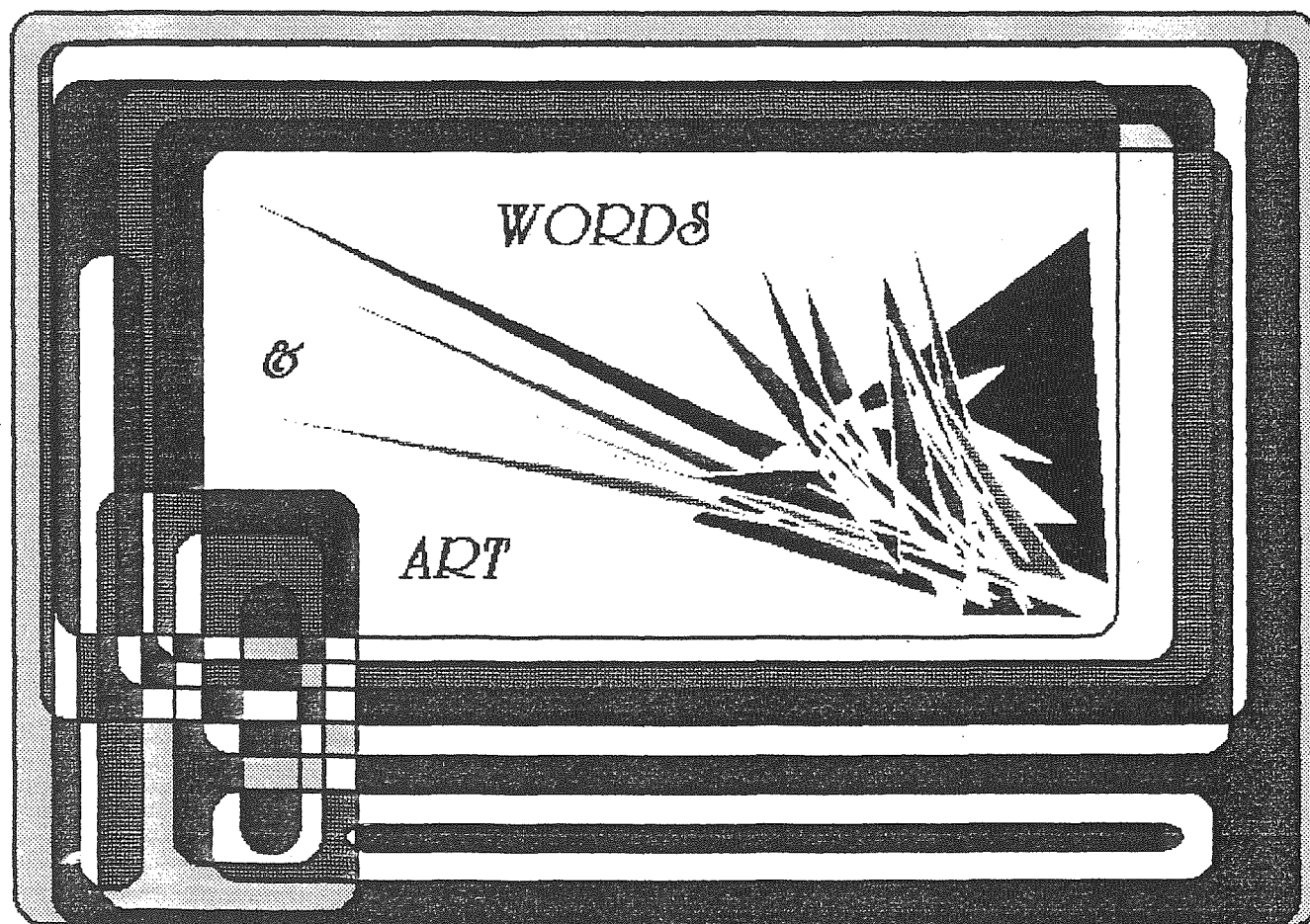
In 1992, three years after I left, she died - as a result of what happened that day the security men came. She contracted HIV which developed into AIDS which resulted in her death. One of her young sisters wrote and I quote "before Irene died, she said, tell Dad I will not be able to see him again, but I loved him and because of him I got this disease, it was not of my making." She left a photo which was taken the year I left and instructed the sister not to post it to me but to wait and give it to me on my return to Uganda.

Nine years I have been in this country, my family is in Uganda and the Secretary of State for the Home Office only recently gave me exceptional leave to remain and I am now allowed to bring my family. Another two of my children have since died. Since I am here I am leaving behind memories and stories which have continued to haunt me : when you look at me, would you believe this story? Yet I am not alone - there are many in my category. I am like a well-cemented grave, outside looking nice yet inside there is a rotting body. If we had the chance or the time to ask every asylum seeker their story, I am sure we would spend a year in this room. Where treasures lie so shall your heart. Where do you think my treasure lies?

I am a man without a place. For us to belong to a place, our hosts must recognise that we are people and individuals like them. We need love and understanding. We are people with problems. Finally I want to thank very much the organisers of this conference which has enabled us to gather together and listen to these moving stories of people without places.

I also wish to appeal to the authorities to give us a listening ear because it is not our choice to be here but the force of those whom they meet, dine and trade with. Please do remind them of the universal adult suffrage of one person one vote and not one person a thousand bullets. Let the authorities here remember that power without control can be dangerous. To my fellow refugees who suffer and cry without tears, I appeal to you to continue lobbying the authorities here to recognise us and accept us. We could be a valuable resource if we were utilised properly. Thank you very much.

Patrick Opendi



Libraries, Information and the Dispossessed

I've come to this meeting today because I particularly wanted to come. As President of the Library Association I am here because I ought to be here. This medal that I have custody of is the Presidential Medal of the Library Association. I want to draw your attention to it because of what it represents. Its Latin inscription, translated, states that : " The Genius of Man is the Property of the Common People". And that is what Public Libraries stand for. These are our Core Values : to educate and inform the people.

What I have to say today will be brief. But it will also be a personal statement, both factual and emotional. Six years ago, in 1991, I moved from the West of Scotland to Hertfordshire. Maybe not a long way in miles, but a long way in many other respects. The climate, the land, the people, were different. I felt a stranger in a different country. There were no Hills, no West Coast Wind, no sense of the rain in the air that you get in North West England and the West of Scotland. And I realised that I was feeling a very powerful emotion I had never known before. I was terribly homesick. And if that was so bad for me, what must it be like for those who are refugees, who are forced into exile, thousands of miles away from a home they may never return to. That must be real dispossession.

And what if a people are dispossessed from their land, their culture, and any knowledge of their own history? I'd like to read you two excerpts from a book by Thomas Johnston, a Radical Socialist and the finest Secretary of State for Scotland that that country has ever possessed. They are both from a book entitled "Our Noble Families", published in 1909. Johnston wrote:

"There are no popular histories of the thefts of the Kwaan and Abbey lands. Even the sparse records of neyfiship are never dragged out to the popular gaze. A democracy ignorant of the past is not qualified either to analyse the present or to shape the future ; and so, in the interests of the High Priests of Politics and the Lordly Money-Changers of society, great care has been taken to offer us stories of useless pageantry, chronicles of the birth and death of Kings, annals of Court intrigue and international war, while withheld from us were the real facts and narratives of moment, the loss of our ancient freedom, the rape of our common lands and the shameless and dastardly methods by which a few selected stocks snatched the patrimony of the people."

The second was a description of a mining village near Edinburgh:

"The houses were a "wretched assemblage of dingy, low-roofed, tile-covered hovels". The collier women, "poor, over-toiled creatures," carried all the coal up a long turnpike stair, inserted in one of the shafts, and it was calculated that each day's labour was equivalent to carrying a hundredweight from the sea level to the top of Ben Lomond.

No wonder, poor things, they cried like children under their load, " no wonder a "peculiar type of mouth . . . wide, open, thick-lipped, projecting equally above and below . . . like savages," was developed, but it is a matter for extreme wonderment that this sort of thing should be going on in Scotland at the very time our sapient legislators were making St Stephens ring with denunciation of negro slavery."

And finally I'd like to read you an excerpt from a poem describing the death of a community, a community destroyed and dispersed by the Highland Clearances of the Nineteenth Century. Sorley MacLean, one of Scotland's finest poets, wrote primarily in the Gaelic, but even translated into English, his poetry still has that wonderful ability to create evocative and poignant imagery. This poem is about a Community which died, a former West Highland Community on the Isle of Raasay, a small island just off Skye. The place and the poem are called Hallaig :

Time, the deer, is in the woods of Raasay

The window is nailed and boarded through which I saw the West
and my love is at the Burn of Hallaig, a birch tree, and she has always been

between Inver and Milk Hollow, here and there about Baile-chuirn :
she is a birch, a hazel, a straight, slender young rowan.

In Screapadal of my people where Norman and Big Hector were,
their daughters and their sons are a wood going up beside the stream.

Proud tonight the pine cocks crowing on the top of Cnoc an Ra,
straight their backs in the moonlight they are not the wood I love.

I will wait for the birch wood until it comes up by the cairn,
until the whole ridge from Beinn na Lice will be under its shade.

If it does not, I will go down to Hallaig, to the Sabbath of the dead,
where the people are frequenting, every single generation gone.

They are still in Hallaig, MacLeans and MacLeods,
all who were there in the time of Mac Gille Chaluim the dead have been seen alive.

The men lying on the green at the end of every house that was,
the girls a wood of birches, straight their backs, bent their heads.

Between the Leac and Fearn the road is under mild moss
and the girls in silent bands go to Clachan as in the beginning,

and return from Clachan, from Suisnish and the land of the living;
each one young and light-stepping, without the heartbreak of the tale."

But not only was this a community, a people, dispossessed of its land, its heritage, its possessions. The Gaelic tradition is an oral tradition, and so in destroying such a community you disperse that oral tradition that is the custodian of its history and its collective memory. This happened in Britain less than 100 years ago. We are still living with the consequences. That sense of dispossession applies as much in Britain, as in many other places in the world.

Joe Hendry

Booksellers for Social Responsibility on ISC

"It is a truism to say that information in all its forms is now a commodity, to be packaged and sold, along with all the other products of our age, in the high street superstores." So opens the editorial announcing Information for Social Change, a journal whose aims include documenting the differing situations in different countries that block free and equal access to information. Editor for the first issue is Chris Atton of Napier University, Edinburgh. "But we want to go further than that, documenting also the alternatives to this control, the radical and progressive channels by which truly unfettered, unmediated ideas may circulate. And further still : to encourage information workers to come together, to share ideas, to foster these alternatives - whether we are publishers, librarians, booksellers, communication workers or distributors."

Czech Fiction From the Post-Kundera Generation

In *The Prague Orgy*, the epilogue to his *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy, the American writer Philip Roth paints a picture of Czech life during what turned out to be the interregnum period between two revolutions - the Prague Spring of 1968 and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Roth's narrator, American author Zuckerman, is fascinated by the existence of a rich literary culture under siege, where major authors are silenced by the regime and forced to survive on menial jobs. "I imagine Styron washing glasses in a Penn Station bar-room, Susan Sontag wrapping buns at a Broadway bakery, Gore Vidal bicycling salamis to school lunchrooms in Queens - I look at the filthy floor and see myself sweeping it." Today, the despair and decadence portrayed in *The Prague Orgy* seem to belong to a distant past.

The Prague Spring, an exuberant but short-lived period of freedom, ended with the Russian invasion in August 1968, putting an abrupt end to a wave of artistic creativity the country had not known since the 1920s. Not that Czech writing disappeared: in fact, in spite of self-imposed or enforced exile and internal political persecution, a number of writers continued to produce significant works of literature during this time. Milan Kundera in Paris, Josef Skvorecky in Toronto, Ivan Klima and Bohumil Hrabal in Prague are all authors with an international reputation, and many other books were published in the west and in Czechoslovakia itself, by samizdat presses. These authors' work had continued to feed on the spirit of the late 1960s, reflecting both the power of the newly opened creative channels and the intellectual devastation and depression of the post-invasion decades.

Within the framework of this conference, it is worth discussing the notion of exile. We are all familiar with the concept of external exile, which entails leaving your country because of political persecution or because you cannot bear to live under the conditions imposed by the regime. But there is also that other, less visible, but often more soul-destroying kind of exile. You don't leave the country, in fact you are locked in it, but you are not a free human being. You may write, in secret, but you cannot publish. Samizdat presses compensated for some of the shortcomings of this situation, but they also created new problems by publishing, indiscriminately, anything that was written "undercover," regardless of quality.

My anthology *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno: Czech Fiction from the Post-Kundera Generation* represents the work of Czech writers whose fiction began to emerge after the other revolution, the so-called Velvet revolution which took place in November 1989. Unlike the Prague Spring, these dramatic events were not a recklessly naive experiment in an otherwise unchanged Eastern European political landscape. They were an integral part of a monumental transformation of the Communist bloc as a whole, in the aftermath of glasnost in the former Soviet Union itself. Under these safe conditions, the country metamorphosed, yet again.

This time there was no talk of socialism with a human face a la Dubcek. After 1989, the emphasis seemed to be on forming a 1990s style replica of the Central-European democracy and culture created by the country's first President, Tomas Masaryk, and destroyed - morally if not physically - in quick succession by Hitler and Stalin.

It is a model well worth imitating. The dynamic Czech literary tradition of the early 20th century has produced some of the most innovative and original writers of the modern era: Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hasek, Karel Capek. Significantly, some of the writing in this collection is strongly influenced by the imagery, humour and language of this older literature, and in some ways suggests a return to their literary vision.

Some of the writing by young Czech writers can be described as experimental in the tradition of 60s-style Western literature, and one might see this as an attempt to catch up on lost time. But it would be a simplification to claim that this new Czech fiction is purely a response to the trauma of the post-68 years. Its role is to fill a much wider gap - the gap left by the rape of Czech culture since 1948, and in a wider sense, since the onset of World War II. There is an underlying longing, on the part of many of these writers, to re-establish their links with the rich Central European literary tradition of the pre-war years. The result is a fresh form of contemporary writing inspired by both the new and the old reality in this unique country between East and West.

"Reality" is a flexible concept in many (perhaps most) of these novels and stories. The great diversity of these new voices - including, for the first time, many women's voices - precludes one from slotting them into "groups". Nevertheless, there is a noticeable and repeated emphasis on creating narratives which are dominated by surreal elements and themes, often using images based on Prague's magical ancient architecture and atmosphere.

Daniela Hodrova is an accomplished master of this new Czech "magical surrealism". In her novel "Perun's Day" she uses fin-de-millennium Prague as a setting for a mystical story involving four women, former classmates (symbolically named Miss John, Miss Luke, Miss Matthew and Miss Mark). It is a time of mysterious sects, strange erotic encounters, religious and pagan rituals and signs. Nothing can be taken for granted, and every word and symbol is open to interpretation. Reading Hodrova is a bit like finding one's way through an intricate labyrinth of hidden meanings. Like a literary alchemist, she mixes mysticism with references to contemporary Prague and its landmarks - churches, towers, the Prague Castle.

The Nightclub Inferno of this anthology's title is borrowed from Hodrova's narrative, and is itself an allusion to the multitude of nightclubs which have sprung up, seemingly overnight, in 1990s Prague, most of them in residential apartment buildings. Miss Mark, wandering through the building in search of her lost handbag, realises "that it is in fact a labyrinth". In the end, she "walks out into the daylight," but is no closer to finding her way - and temporarily, neither is the reader.

Hodrova's highly original novels are complex, but well worth deciphering. Her fiction is firmly rooted in Prague's neighbourhoods, but it transcends their physical reality and achieves a universal quality.

A not entirely dissimilar approach can be found in the work of Michal Ajvaz. His *Other City* is also based on an abstraction of a Kafkaesque Prague, and is also an attempt to find a hidden spiritual world somewhere beneath or beyond its physical surface. "Is it possible that we live in close proximity to a world teeming with strange life, a world which perhaps has been here since before our town existed and yet of which we know nothing?" his narrator asks, and in fact goes on to become closely involved with surreal objects, characters and plots which exist in a universe parallel to, but not identical with our own: "...we crawl under a bed to retrieve a pencil and abruptly find ourselves in a mysterious cave, its walls covered with magic, quivering balls of dust, a cave where something evil is slowly ripening, something which... will crawl out into daylight." Here too, daylight does not symbolize existential safety or release: it is simply another dimension, no less challenging than its dark counterpart.

Marta Kadlecikova's darkly surreal and somewhat pre-89 story *Ode to Joy* is set in an Orwellian-style society where citizens must display overt signs of happiness. So when one of them begins to lose his hands and feet he's in trouble - but even as a human reject without those body parts, spending his time in a pot by the window, or in a baby carriage, he is ostentatiously happy. Life goes on.

Alexandra Berkova's novella *The Sorrows of a Devoted Scoundrel* is a highly original take on the idea of God sending his most devoted angel into the real world in order to appreciate the difference between good and evil. The angel, a stranger among common people, travels from place to place, listens to stories of human suffering and observes the absurdity of human life. He tries to interfere, becomes involved, improves things here and there (or the opposite), but in the end learns to accept the world just the way it is - another Czech characteristic.

Jachym Topol is one of the best known representatives of the new generation of Czech writers. His ambitious novel *Sister* is a breathtaking outpouring of pent-up post-89 emotions, couched in a language and structure which are demonstratively free, subversive and innovative. There is a carefree self-consciousness about Topol's style which is an important sign of the times, and suggests a profound need to cover as much literary territory as possible, without too much regard for the reader. "Coincidentally I use the tongue of Slavs, of Czechs, of slaves, of once upon a time German and Russian slaves, and it's a dog's tongue. A clever dog knows how to survive and what price to pay for it... It's a tongue that should have been destroyed, and its time has yet to come, it never will..." In this passage, with self-irony and without self-pity, Topol has written a concise mini-history of Czech culture.

In a more recent, short novella, Angel, Topol is equally unsentimental about life in the new Czech republic. With the early idealism of the "post-bolshevik" days long gone, people like Machata are flourishing under the "regime". And who is Machata? Surely, one of the least appealing characters in Czech literature: "It was just part of the new times. Machata was no downtrodden super anymore either, an informer with busts on his record and a small-time tobacconist with an axa of debt hanging eternally over his head. No sir, that was the old days." Today, he is the "esteemed storekeeper Richard Machata, feared and respected in his territory." Also a child abuser, racist and occasional rapist. Topol's writing reflects the complexities of the transition from the old kind of society to the new, with unerring accuracy of detail. He does not celebrate, he describes. His Prague is not unpoetic, but it is the poetry of a seedy metropolis, not a magical abstraction. Religion, race and crime are on the agenda, under their own names, not surreal symbols of good and evil.

Tereza Bouckova's *Quail* and Jiri Kratochvil's *The Story of King Kandaules* provide, each in its own way, damning accounts of male-female relationships in Czechoslovakia. It is appropriate to use this no longer valid name for the Czech Republic in this context because both books, although written in the 1990s, reflect back on the earlier, pre-89 years. In *Quail*, the difficult life of Hana, a single mother, is compounded by political problems and her complete loneliness. Within the framework of this collection, this story stands out as ostensibly introverted and disconnected from the world outside of Hana's private difficulties. Where, in a society paralysed by a totalitarian regime, all other struggles may have ceased or diminished in strength and importance, Bouckova tells an almost militant tale of a woman's survival.

Kratochvil's story, although written in 1990, returns to the 1960s, and it too analyses relationships between men and women from a different perspective. Some of its scenes seem to be inspired by Roth's *Prague Orgy*. The relationship between art and eros is explored from a somewhat unusual angle. Significantly, a beautiful woman (Czech bimbo to you) gains a reputation as the country's leading poetess, whose erotic verses are revered by all but in fact are written by a man. "...I would like to note once again that our story takes place in the middle of the sixties, when literature was the centre of attention and new books by popular authors sold nearly as many copies as cookbooks..." Good old days?

This brings us to Michal Viewegh. He is the only young Czech author whose books are commercially highly successful, and this at a time when Czech readers are over-satiated by numerous sources of popular entertainment and overburdened by the pressures of the new economic system (which is currently in crisis). Viewegh's writing has that classic Czech quality which seems to have disappeared from much of contemporary Czech literature: humour and irony. His novels are multi-layered and often self-referential, with frequent dabs at the Czech literary establishment in (correct) anticipation of its criticism. In his novels, Viewegh forgoes symbolism and mysticism in favour of an uncluttered look at the funnier side of life in his country.

The new reality is taken for granted, and is no longer seen as exotic. "During the afternoon siesta Max [the author's alter-ego] had intended to write, but instead during the afternoon siesta he masturbated twice. His personality was divided." This writer - both the fictional and the real one - has managed to beat Zuckerman/Roth at his own game: instead of oppression-induced eros, he offers sex in a free country with a loving parody of (yet another) lovable proverbial Czech bimbo thrown in.

It may be necessary to explain the presence of Daniela Fischerova's story A letter for President Eisenhower and Alexandr Kliment's Boredom in Bohemia in this collection, given that the former deals with the 1950s, and the latter with 1967. Both offer an unhurried look at life in former Czechoslovakia. Both deal with an issue that is definitely a thing of the past, hopefully never to return: the great ideological, spiritual and physical divide between East and West which had an all-pervasive effect on the lives of all individuals living in the country. In Fischerova's story, a 10 year old girl is asked to write a letter to president Eisenhower, which will never be mailed. Kliment's narrator, whose motto is "why should I get upset", is about to emigrate, knowing that this means a permanent severing of his links with his homeland, in every sense. Yet not to emigrate may mean an exile of a different sort, a spiritual one.

This talk would not be complete if I omitted to explain my own personal interest in compiling this anthology. I left Prague in 1970, at the age of 16, and did not return until 1994. I knew I would never lose my connection with the Czech culture and language, but I also know that I had lost my home. The images in so many of these texts may have symbolic meanings, but they are also the landscapes and cityscapes of my childhood and adolescence. The unusually constructed church described in Hodrova's novel is the dominant landmark of my old neighbourhood, where as a child I used to play marbles and chat to friendly old ladies sitting on park benches. My school friends lived in the streets she names (some still do). By creating this collection, I may have tried to compensate for a fraction of my own loss. I know that, had I stayed in Prague, I would have wanted to be one of the authors included in this anthology, not its editor.

Elena Lappin

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The 1951 UN Convention defines a refugee as "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his (sic) nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residency as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

The Refugee Council is a good starting point for anyone seeking information or advice for asylum seekers or refugees. They may be contacted at: Refugee Council, Advice and Referral Team, 3 Bondway, London SW8 1SJ. Tel 0171 820 3000, Fax 0171 582 9929; Telephone advice line 0171 582 1162.

The Refugee Council's Refugee Advisers Support Unit (RASU) advises and supports people working with refugees, providing information bulletins for advisors and leaflets for their clients. Their address is: Refugee Advisers Support Unit, The Refugee Council, 3, Bondway, London SW8 1SJ. Tel 0171 582 9927, fax 0171 582 9929.

The Refugees Arrivals Project (RAP) provides a general advice service to asylum seekers applying at port of entry and those who may be detained. They advise refugees during the first stage following their arrival in the country. They can be found at Room 2005, Queen's Building, Heathrow Airport, Hounslow, London TW6 1DL. Tel 0181 759 5740, fax 0181 759 7058.

The Detention Advice Service and Asylum Aid can both be reached at: 244a Upper Street, London N1 1RU, Tel for DAS: 0171 704 8007, fax 0171 354 9187. Tel for Asylum Aid 0171 359 4026, Fax 0171 354 9187.

Dick Williams

The Writers' Paradigm

I would like to start by reading extracts from the 'Declaration by 134 Iranian Writers' in October 1994 :

We are writers;

But because of the unresolved issues in the contemporary history of Iranian and other societies, the image of writers held by the Government, sections of the society and even among some writers themselves, has become distorted. As a consequence, the identity of the writer, the essence of her/his writing and the collective presence of writers have become the subject of confusion and inappropriate reactions.

We, Iranian writers, therefore, see it as our duty to elucidate the nature of cultural work and the *raison d'être* for our collective presence.

We are writers! This means that we express and publish our emotions, imagination and explorations in different forms. It is our basic natural, social and civil rights that our written work - including poetry, novels, short stories, plays, film scenarios, literary research and criticism as well as translations of works written by all the other writers in the world - reach our readers without any interference and impediment. Of course, everybody is entitled to make her/his judgement about a literary work; similarly, they are free to criticise the work after it is published; but no person or institution has the authority, under any pretext or excuse, to hinder or stop the publication of a work.

When our individual abilities and resources fail to overcome the overwhelming proscriptions to write and think freely, we see no alternative other than to take a professional stand against these barriers. In other words, in order to protect our freedom of thought and expression and preserve our right to publish, we have to stand together and act collectively. For this reason we are of the opinion that:

Our policy to form a united stand and establish a professional association of Iranian writers will guarantee that a writer will be free to choose how she/he wants to create her/his work as well as analyse and criticize others' works. Given that the individual is always solely responsible for her/his personal, political or social acts and thoughts, a writer's acceptance of and participation in the common issues concerning 'ahl-e qalam' [the associates of pen] do not make her/him accountable for the personal dilemmas and predicaments faced by other writers.

Despite the obvious points illustrated above, it is often the case that a writer, instead of being proclaimed a writer and accepted as such, is invariably affiliated, by means of alleged accusations, to dubious parties, groups or fractions and judged accordingly.

Consequently, the collective identity of writers under a professional-cultural framework is regarded as constituting the formation of a party or the declaration of a political ideology.

The 134 signatories emphasise that their main goal and priority is to remove the obstacles to freedom of thought, expression and publication. They grant that the accountability for anything written rests with its author and whoever puts her/his signature under it; that the right to analyse and appraise any written work is bestowed upon everybody and is not confined to a particular institution or group of people. Indeed, criticism is the pre-requisite of cultural progress. But they insist that investigating the private affairs of a writer as a pretext to sanction her/his work with critical comments is a flagrant violation of her/his human rights and an infringement of her/his privacy. The condemnation of a writer with moral and ideological pretences is against democracy and violates the writer's principles and dignity. The signatories also assert that defending the human and civil rights of any writer, whatever the circumstances, is the duty and obligation of all writers.

The declaration is summed up with the assertion that the collective identity of writers and their united stance is the only guarantee for the individual writer's freedom and independence.

Unfortunately my colleagues have yet to succeed in creating an independent collective in Iran.

The formation of the Iranian P.E.N. Centre in Exile, at the 61st International P.E.N. Congress, in Prague, coincided with the submission of this open letter to the Iranian authorities and the world public.

It is becoming increasingly evident that in order to secure freedom of expression in different parts of the globe this collective identity of writers has to be forged at an international level rather than at national levels. Thus the World Association of Writers.

More than 75 years have passed since the birth of International P.E.N. Today it has more than 100 centres and almost 15,000 members. It is still growing and is one of a dozen special status NGOs sponsored by UNESCO. Its impact and influence in the past have been disproportional to its tiny size. Today its influence and authority derive from the fact that the era of Ideology has come to an end - or, as put forward by Havel, Rushdie and a number of others, we have entered an age when literature has taken over the role played by both religion and ideology.

President Havel, in his inauguration speech at the 61st P.E.N. Congress in Prague (November 1994), stated that we, writers, much as we (or the majority of us) hated politics, are beings who know more about people and about their inner thoughts and feelings and, therefore, cannot remain indifferent to what goes on in the world. He proposed a Brotherhood of Writers (he even used the term Mafia as an analogy) which, though it would be political, it would be so only in the broadest sense of the term.

Nonetheless, we, writers, are reluctant to formulate a thesis which would claim for us a special status similar to the one Ayatollah Khomeini created for the clergy.

These days this collective identity is campaigning for the unconditional release of Mr Faraj Sarkoohi.

Mr Sarkoohi was the editor of the independent literary magazine Adineh. He 'disappeared' on 3 November 1996. While keeping Mr Sarkoohi in detention, the Iranian authorities, claimed that he had boarded a plane for Germany. On 20 December 1996, convening a press conference at Tehran Mehrabad Airport, they brought forth Mr Sarkoohi and forced him to refute his 'disappearance' with a fantastic story. From then on, they kept Mr Sarkoohi under constant surveillance and then re-arrested him on 27 January 1997.

A letter written and smuggled out by Mr Sarkoohi prior to his second arrest, wherein he describes the horrendous ordeal he had been put through by the Iranian authorities, has been published in the Western Press.

Let me quote a few sentences from this testimony "They fabricated lies and forced me to repeat them... To coerce me to appear credible and normal, they beat me up! When they saw that beating me would not improve my performance, they beat me harder... I kept asking them to kill me or to give me something so that I could take my own life... I am a broken man... I am absolutely desolate and without hope... I am about to die for a crime not only of which I am innocent but in full negation of all my efforts in life."

Notwithstanding that illegal departure is a criminal offence in Iran, it remains true that the charge announced on 3rd of February by the Iranian Foreign Ministry and repeated on Iranian News Agency IRNA, a day later - that Sarkoohi was spying for Germany - is totally fabricated and was hastily formulated in order to justify the arrests of Faraj Sarkoohi and his brother Ismail. On February 6, 1997, IRNA alleged that Faraj Sarkoohi had had an extra-marital affair with the journalist Parvin Ardalan. In a staged trial, this is an easier charge to prove than spying; and it also carries the death penalty. The Islamic Republic might well proceed to 'eliminate' Mr Sarkoohi on fabricated charges of spying and with forcefully extracted confessions!

It is very likely that Mr Sarkoohi will be charged, like Mr Sa'idi Sirjani in 1994, with the customary range of offences, ie. acts of sodomy, possession, distribution and consumption of alcohol and drugs, links with counter-revolutionary militants inside the country as well as Western intelligence services. The Iranian authorities will claim that he has confessed to all these crimes as well as allege that he has admitted to having worked for the Shah's secret police.

With total disregard of the basic standards of jurisprudence or indeed common sense, the forthcoming staged trial will degenerate into a series of live or video-recorded confessions by the Sarkoohi brothers. We are concerned that in the first in a series of forced confessions, Mr Sarkoohi will deny that he has written his internationally published open letter thus undermining the credibility of one of the strongest indictments ever written against a government.

It becomes clear from Mr Sarkoohi's testimony that his persecution, abduction, detention and forced confessions were plotted by the Islamic Republic to secure two objectives: 1) to subvert the Mykonos trial in Germany where members of a death-squad dispatched by the Iranian government were being tried for the murders of Iranian Kurdish leaders. 2) To bring to an end the cultural resistance that had started by the open letter signed by the 134 Iranian writers in November 1994.

Given the above situation and in view of the recent murder of the journalist and publisher, Ebrahim Zalzadeh, in highly suspicious circumstances, we believe that Faraj Sarkoohi's situation is extremely critical.

"The evil that gaoled Mr Sarkoohi serves many governments; it is invariably merciless. Yesterday, in Nigeria, this evil killed nine Ogoni activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa; today, it is dismembering Sarkoohi; simultaneously, it is stalking Wol Soyinka, the Nobel Laureate".

"Writers in Prison Committees, in England and elsewhere, under the International Writers In Prison Committee's umbrella, fight this evil with great determination. This year, though still haunted by Ken Saro-Wiwa's judicial murder, we kept hoping that there would be a general reversal. that no writers would be killed. Alas, that is not the case. This year's total is over 30 dead, some of them from countries that claim to be - and are considered to be - democratic. At least half these murders were committed by opposition forces, factions that, structured as Mafia-type organisations, have embraced terror tactics. This is an alarming development and often leaves us impotent, with no visible authority to address.

"However, we maintain a measure of success. We have been instrumental in the release of a good number of imprisoned writers. among them TEFERA ASMARE of Ethiopia, MOHAMMED SULE of Nigeria, HALUK GERGER of Turkey, ABOU BRAHAMANE SANGARE of the Ivory Coast, and Journalist and Lawyer, NAY MIN of Myanmar. We use the Rapid Action Network expertly and extensively; we protest to many Embassies as well as to many Heads of States: we lobby our Parliament and various Desks at the Foreign Office; and we demonstrate. English PEN's WiPC is demonstrating weekly now, on Mondays at 4.30 to 5.30 p.m., outside the Iranian Embassy, for Sarkoohi's release.

I should like to finish this section by repeating the reassurance that concluded Moris Farhi's brief but effective speech. "We will continue our vigorous campaign. The Abachas of Nigeria, the Iranian rulers and all their counterparts may have become dehumanised but they are not fools; they know we can defeat them; that's why they are trying to stifle our voices."

Let us now concentrate on Iran.

The verdict of the Mykonos trial implicated the top echelons of the Iranian regime. It was announced on 8 April 1997 and led the governments of the European Union to recall their ambassadors from Tehran. However, the Foreign Ministers, gathering in Luxembourg on 28 April 1997, decided to continue to maintain a 'critical dialogue' with the Iranian authorities and sent the recalled ambassadors back. In the absence of a serious and relentless intervention by the European Union for the immediate release of Mr Sarkoohi and in the light of the decision that saw the return of the European envoys to Iran, the Iranian authorities will assume that they need take no account of international outrage; in effect, they will presume that they have been sanctioned to continue to suppress freedom of expression.

Probably the announcement of the Mykonos verdict has been an anti-climax; but it allows me to spare you the details of all the assassinations which the Iranian regime carried out, all these years, against Iranian dissidents abroad without having to account for them. No further proof is required.

Once again, the European countries have lost the initiative. The Iranian Government was even reluctant to accept the ambassadors' return.

Let me quote from a letter I wrote with an Economist colleague to The Independent (published 3 March 1989):

"The West has invariably based its policy towards the Islamic Republic on optimism that the power struggle inside Iran would strengthen the position of a certain faction: the so-called "moderates". But the radicalism attributed by the West to one faction alone is in fact a strategy of the whole regime for dealing with its failures. Without practising Islam, the regime would lose its only source of popular support. And while practising Islam does not preclude trade relations with the West, it will inevitably result in situations similar to the Salman Rushdie case in which the West cannot accommodate the demands of the Islamic regime without compromising its own ideals.

The Western governments (and the Western media) celebrated the election of President Rafsanjani as a moderate and pragmatic figure. This provided them again with the excuse to continue with the so-called 'critical dialogue'. We are, therefore, apprehensive that the newly elected President Khatami, who won with a considerable mandate, is wrongly depicted by Western officials and media as 'Ayatollah Gorbachev', that is to say, as a liberal statesman.

At the same time we hope that the regime interprets this considerable mandate for Khatami - instead of for Nateq-Noori (the Speaker of the Majlis) - as a peaceful exercise by the Iranian people to assert their disillusionment with the Islamic Republic and to signal their wish to attain and enjoy freedom and democracy without having to undergo, if at all possible, a violent revolution. During his presidential campaign, Khatami has promised to uphold freedom of expression and the observance of human rights in Iran. Our assessment is that, even assuming he is inclined to honour his promises - not to mention the absence of a credible political opposition - a metamorphosis of the Iranian regime to the extent that would enable it to accommodate basic demands and observe human rights is unlikely. The case of Sarkoohi presents itself as a good test.

To substantiate this assessment I have to delve much deeper into the nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran - and certain critical events - to expose the regime's contradictions and institutionalized incapacity for reform. A well known example of this incapacity is, of course, the fatwa (religious edict) issued by Khomeini against Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*.

Implosion

Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa has become a model for condemning and threatening writers all over the Muslim world.

It is true, there are countries, at present, which have more of their writers in prison than the IRI; but not one of them has the unenviable record of imposing coercion and intolerance in the name of God and for the souls of every man as well as the world's underprivileged. Few have assumed power and legitimacy as a result of a historic revolution, then proceeded to brutally suppress the elements that tried to preserve the ideals of that revolution. We have no illusions about the nature of the Nigerian junta; yet, it will fall sooner or later. But, in Iran, the list of many thousands of political prisoners executed after the 1979 revolution is gradually forgotten because the regime has succeeded in crushing all attempts at resistance inside Iran and no longer has to kill on the same scale.

I would like to quote again from the letter in *The Independent*:

"Ayatollah Khomeini's incitement to murder Salman Rushdie has cast considerable light on the plight of writers and artists in Iran. The event serves to reveal to Western eyes the treatment that is meted out to any writer or artist in Iran whose work does not wholly embrace the ideals of Khomeini's Islamic Republic or who fails to echo the political slogan of the day. The time has come for the British Government to alter fundamentally its attitude towards Khomeini's Iran into one of complete rejection, that is to say, a refusal to accept any diplomatic or economic overtures not only until this particular storm has passed but for as long as the current regime remains in power."

The recommendation went unheeded but the storm did not pass very quickly. The West failed to impose any sanctions on the IRI thus enabling the regime to impose sanctions against Iranian dissidents abroad.

Failing to take an uncompromising stand was not much different from "appeasing the IRI". It is not coincidental that The Economist (15 January 1994), used the same title for an editorial which exposed the dangerous path taken by some Western countries in appeasing the Islamic Republic, despite the mounting evidence of its continuous terrorist activities abroad, in order 'to win a few more contracts'.

Antimatter

In my opinion, to persuade Iran to give up terrorism and to abandon policies that abused freedom of expression and human rights - values cherished by Western governments - it was necessary to ensure, first and foremost, that Mr. Rushdie, would live freely. Western governments should have made it clear that in the event of anything happening to Mr. Rushdie, they would have held the Iranian regime responsible. They should have announced a series of severe measures which would have been set into immediate motion in the event of his death.

This may not have satisfied Mr. Rushdie, but nor would he have been satisfied by a pronouncement by the Iranian regime abandoning its demand for his death. Such a declaration would not be worth the paper it is written on. In the event of Mr Rushdie's death, the Islamic regime would happily claim victory at home, but deny responsibility in the international arena.

The Islamic regime has repeatedly endorsed the fatwa on Mr. Rushdie. Latterly, Mr. Rushdie announced that he is determined to return to normal life. Simultaneously, he has argued that a final diplomatic initiative by the West might be sufficient to get the fatwa lifted. Having approached John Major, Vaclav Havel and other heads of Western governments, he crowned his efforts to persuade the West to take this initiative by meeting President Bill Clinton. This produced little tangible effect; and, not surprisingly, it encouraged 'the Iranians to continue with their murderous practices'.

In my view if there is a way to resolve this unholy situation, it has to be based on an acceptance of the following facts:

- 1) The fatwa cannot be rescinded except by Khomeini himself. It has more authority and permanence than a papal encyclical. The policy of the Western governments and the International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie, among other NGOs, in trying to become interpreters of Islamic laws is like pretending to know more about Catholicism than the pope. Consequently, trying to persuade the IRI to lift the fatwa is doomed to failure.

Besides, even without this theological impasse, IRI would never have swallowed its pride and let itself be seen to reconsider its position, let alone succumb to international pressure.

2) Given the Islamic regime's declarations at the highest diplomatic channels that the best way out - for both the Iranian regime and Western governments - is for the Rushdie issue to be starved of publicity and removed from any agenda for bilateral and international negotiations, it is probably not very keen on risking diplomatic opprobrium by hunting Salman Rushdie down. But it has become more intolerant of other dissidents.

3) With its attack on Rushdie, the Iranian regime has revealed to the world what Iranian exiles already knew to be its true nature. In this sense, if no other, Mr Rushdie's loss of liberty has not been in vain. Other victims of the regime share his plight. The fate of those who live in exile - potential future victims - also depends on whether Rushdie can truly return to normal life.

What would have guaranteed safety and an early return to normal life for Mr. Rushdie would have been stiff and immediate countermeasure - not goodwill, nor the expectation of an official U-turn on the fatwar.

The Western governments know that asking the fatwa to be rescinded is like pissing in the wind. In any case, they have sympathised with President Rafsanjani when he made a distinction between official state policy and religious position. Both sides prefer to walk along this dead end. The problem is human rights. PEN centres and my fellow writers in the west engage in the Islamic discourse with the wishful thinking that they can preach Islamic tenets to the IRI government. They claim, for instance, that the fatwa ceases to be valid when its author dies. The truth is that no Ayatollah has the power to pronounce on the continued validity of Khomeini's fatwas because none of them - including Khamenei - has the kind of authority Khomeini had: the authority which unifies political and religious leadership.

Moreover, attempting such a course of action would be suicidal for a theocracy; nothing would be likely to undermine its existence more. It is the last thing such a regime is prepared to do; it would be its death knell. More than likely the fatwa will vanish into history when the Islamic Republic ceases to exist. Therefore, the only way to get rid of it is by establishing a secular state in Iran.

However, I do not want to give you the impression that the contradictory nature of the Islamic regime is due to its adherence to Islamic Fundamentalism. (Such a contradictory nature has been attributed to the Taleban in Afghanistan, the Algerian opposition, the Christian Evangelists in the United States and the ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel.) That is why we need to re-embark upon a re-appraisal of the Islamic Republic of Iran. What follows was written in 1989 but it still illuminates a few fundamental questions, including whether IRI is a fundamentalist regime.

Supernova, Superconductor, Polarization and the Black Hole Binary

It is often said that the people of Iran were robbed of their revolution by Khomeini and his associates and that the Spring of Freedom came to an abrupt end in 1979. The revolutionary euphoria died after it became clear that Khomeini, soon after coming to power, retracted all that he had promised in Paris and that these promises had been a tactical move. Yet for all those who wanted to look beyond the destruction of the Shah's regime the evidence of what would follow under Khomeini's rule was there to be seen.

In 1977, the Shah, under pressure at home and, in response to President Carter's policies for promoting human rights, had declared a so-called "open political atmosphere". Seizing upon this opportunity, the Iranian Writers' Association (IWA) organized, in early October, the famous "Ten Nights of Poetry" which, later, came to be regarded by many as one of the first sparks of the 1979 revolution.

On 12th November 1977, Khomeini sent a message asking the Moslem people of Iran to refrain from co-operating with those people who were not acting within a hundred percent Islamic framework. He declared that "this recent procrastination of the Government which allowed the writers to write and the individuals to express their opinions is a big farce, a deceit to wash away the Shah's responsibilities. Writers cannot point their finger at the core of the repression, at the Shah himself who is the source of all the atrocities. Indeed, it is possible that some of these writers are agents of the regime and are trying to confuse and mislead the simple-minded people....."

Three days later in another message Khomeini gave the following explicit warning: "Those who are committed to Islam should not allow the opportunists (who have not taken one step or have not written one word for Islam and for the noble people of Iran), to make use of this opportunity now and, from behind the mask of patriotism and the struggle for freedom, make themselves popular among the suffering people." Khomeini concludes that "the people of Iran and all classes of clergy have to act with utmost caution and insight; they have to seize the initiative and disappoint these opportunists [writers] who are seeking their own self-interest."

On 31 December 1977, Khomeini, strongly criticised the clergy for failing to see the event as an opportunity for protest. Khomeini told them: "at this moment writers of Ahzab [affiliated to parties] are making their protest, signing written declarations, questioning the regime. Why don't the clergy do the same? Why can't a hundred clergymen sign a letter of protest? Do not let this opportunity slip by. Write together, tell the world what is wrong. If you cannot publish your protests inside we will publish them outside.... but do not be afraid to confront the regime. Others have written strong protestations and nothing has happened to them.... The situation is quite different from any other time. If we do not take the initiative and he [the Shah] responds to their demands, it will be a severe blow to Islam."

Therefore, it is not surprising that the history of the Islamic regime, since its establishment in Iran, has been one of the destruction of all manifestation of literature, art, and culture, and the massive oppression and execution of tens of thousands of people.

Women, minorities and ethnic groups, writers, poets and artists, intellectuals, university professors and school teachers and students have never been under such pressure in Iran as in the past two decades.

The process of the so-called Islamization of the country and of the "Cultural Revolution" launched by the present regime has been carried out in waves of purges, closures of universities - sometimes for years - arrests, detention, execution; many have been driven into exile; countless students of tender age have been served as fodder to the destructive and catastrophic Iran-Iraq war. And there have been major changes to the contents of the educational curriculum to divest them of all present day values.

Women are kept in veil, counted as half-beings - sometimes as non-beings - and, except when in the service of the regime, driven away from an active life.

Atrocities inflicted on ethnic groups and religious minorities are but other features of the ruthless policies of Iran's Islamic State.

Every branch of the mass media is controlled by the state; censorship reigns supreme; over an estimated one and a half million Iranians, including many poets, writers, journalists, playwrights, musicians, actors, film and theatre directors, are in exile.

The headquarters of the Iranian Writers' Association was raided very soon after the establishment of the present regime in Iran. It was ransacked, vandalized and closed down. Some members were arrested; others driven into hiding.

No-Hair Conjecture

Iran is a member of the UN, a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as well as of many international human rights instruments, among them the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Geneva Conventions. The Islamic Republic has clearly demonstrated that it considers itself bound by these commitments by appearing, in 1982, before the Human Rights Committee which examined its compliance with the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. And yet, notwithstanding its actual record on these issues, the fact is that the constitution of the Islamic Republic does not comply with these provisions.

The Islamic regime of Iran is a theocracy. Except Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews (Kofaar-e Zammi), other Non-Moslem Iranians are not recognized as a religious minority. The recognized minorities are subject to Islamic laws and are entitled to elect separately a minority candidate to the Islamic Assembly. The constitution does not specify the rights of the people, irrespective of their religious beliefs, nor the rights of non-Moslems. It only states that Moslems are expected to treat decently those non-Moslems who do not act against Islam. A born or converted Moslem who becomes an infidel (Kaafar) is punished by death.

Infidels cannot inherit from Moslems. They cannot be employed by government organisations, universities etc. According to Article 7 and Article 22 of the Law of Retribution (Ghessass) which constitutes part of the Penal Code, if a Moslem is murdered by a non-Moslem or if a Zoroastrian, a Christian or a Jew, is murdered by any other Non-Moslem then the act of murder, strictly speaking, is not punishable unless all the arrangements for blood money have been concluded. Fornication by a non-Moslem with a Moslem woman has a death penalty whereas the punishment for fornication by a Moslem is 100 lashes (Article 102 of Law of Retribution).

People are equal before the Law irrespective of their race, colour and language but not irrespective of their sex or religion. More fundamentally, they do not have equal rights but they are equally subject to the Islamic Law which discriminates among them.

Article 21 is paternalistic towards women but instead of removing the sexual discrimination embedded in Article 19 prescribes that "the Government is to guarantee the rights of women within the Islamic framework and carry out certain duties."

The prescribed duties are: establishing the right atmosphere for the development of the women's character, supporting mothers, widows and the elderly, preserving family relationships by establishing appropriate courts, and giving guardianship of children to mothers in the absence of any male next of kin.

As a result of the constitutional degradation of women, the following discriminations are in force: age of marriage for women reduced from 18 to 9. A man can divorce his wife on any pretext. This can be done in her absence and does not need any justification. Women, on the other hand, can obtain divorce only under extreme circumstances. Women do not have custody of their children during marriage, after divorce or even after the death of their husband. A divorced woman loses the custody of her children to their father after the age of 7 for girls and 2 for boys. On the father's death custody passes to the paternal grandfather.

Women inherit half as much as men. Before travelling, enrolling on a course or starting a job, a married woman must obtain written permission from her husband. A man is permitted four "ordinary" wives and as many concubines as he wishes. A Moslem woman cannot marry a non-Moslem but a non-Moslem woman can become the concubine of a Moslem man.

A woman cannot become a judge, President of the Republic; she cannot even be contemplated as a Vali-e Faghih (religious leader). The evidence of a female witness is inadmissible unless accompanied by that of a male witness. Even in such circumstances the value of the evidence given by a woman counts as half the value of the evidence given by a male. (Article 33 and Article 99 of the Law of Hodoud and Qessass). The blood money (Diyeh) for a Moslem woman is half that of a Moslem man. If a Moslem male intentionally kills a Moslem woman, he is subject to retribution; however, the guardian of the murdered woman has to pay half of the Diyeh to the murderer before capital punishment can be carried out (Article 6 of Diyat).

The blood money payable to the murderer amounts to 50 camels or 100 cows or the equivalent (Article 3 of Diyat), clearly outside the financial capabilities of the majority of Iranians. A husband can kill his adulterous wife without fear of retribution while a woman is punishable by death if she kills her unfaithful husband.

Article 23 recognizes freedom of thought ("inquisition is forbidden and nobody can be questioned or persecuted because of his/her beliefs"). While this reflects the gist of Article 18 of the UDHR, there is nothing analogous to Article 19 of the UDHR in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. There is no constitutional right to seek, receive or impart information and ideas through any medium for the people of Iran.

Recognised religious minorities are allowed to practice their own religions but they are not allowed to proselytize or promote these religions. Other infidels are forbidden to express their beliefs, let alone promote or propagate it. To put it briefly, ideas opposed to Islam are not tolerated. Within the Islamic framework, Moslems and the government are given the right to interfere with each other in order to propagate what is approved and to dissuade what is not approved.

According to Article 25, "newspapers and the press are free to publish any item provided it is not violating the principles of Islam or public rights". Article 175, which has been modified in the recent revision of the constitution, is concerned with radio and television, both controlled by the state. According to this article, freedom of expression and dissemination of ideas in radio/television, is protected if Islamic principles are observed and the interest of the country is taken into account. The appointment and sacking of the head of the organisation which runs the state media comes under the authority of the religious leader. A commission which has two representatives appointed by the President, two representative from the Islamic Assembly and two from the Judiciary supervises the state media.

In the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the legitimacy of power comes from God, not the people. God has decided that people can determine their social destiny but they can exercise this eternal right only as long as they adhere to Islam and Velayat-e Faghih. Faghih (religious expert) is Vali, the guardian of the people and holds their destiny in his hand.

According to the theory of Velayat-e Faghih (the political supremacy of the religious expert), the people are not capable of having an independent opinion and cannot distinguish what is in their interest. They have to follow the leader and obey his commands without question or hesitation. The Constitution is the only apparatus with which to realise the principle of Velayat-e Faghih. Article 57 positions the religious leader above the legislative, judiciary and executive powers.

Now, according to the recent revisions in the Constitution, the religious leader - and not the President - is the intermediary between these powers. Effectively, even at this stage, these powers have only token independence.

Following the Khomeini era, the leader is chosen by experts (religious dignitaries) who are themselves elected by the people. If the experts find a suitable and qualified successor, he is appointed leader; if not, one of the foghaha will be chosen (previously they would have formed a council of foghaha). The leader has total power and authority and is answerable to nobody. He is the commander in chief of the army. He can declare war or agree to peace. He appoints members of the Council of Guardians, the highest ranks in the Judiciary, the chief of state media organisation, the head of General Staff and the top commanders of the Army, Air Force, Navy as well as the Police and other law and order and security organisations. He appoints the commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards. He has to approve the President's appointment and has the authority to sack him. He has to approve referenda and reduction of sentences. He determines general policy and has control over its execution. And, crucially enough, he has the right to delegate some of his duties to other persons.

According to Article 111, the Council of Experts can remove the leader if he becomes feeble or loses his qualifications; but they cannot, in any way, restrict the power of the leader as long as he is in reasonable good health. There is no mechanism to voice any disagreement with the leader, let alone to challenge him. The Council of Experts, as in 1979, are pre-nominated; the most the people can do is to choose between the nominees.

The history of the Islamic Republic has been a ruthless process of super-imposing instruments of censorship and dictatorship on political structures; these, in their turn, were meant to legitimise the reign of the leader and to institutionalise the enslavement of the people.

The people elect their representatives to the Islamic Legislative Assembly against this background of the religious leader's supremacy. Let us consider how much right the people can exercise through this Assembly.

The legislative power in the Islamic Republic is not the legislator in the conventional sense. Its role is to compile the Law. i.e., to interpret and give expression to the Islamic Law. The Islamic Assembly cannot legislate laws which violates the Islamic principles or are contradictory to the Constitution.

Conclusion

The pen is mightier than the sword. Absolutism is inherently unstable. The degree of Iran's economic development has probably made it impossible for a Taliban-style fundamentalism to root and flourish in the country. There is evidence that Islamic fundamentalism was superseded by religious absolutism in the latter years of Khomeini's rule. Allowing expediency to become the meta-principle has provided room for manoeuvre for the Islamic Republic but it has emptied it of legitimacy nor has it resolved its contradictions or anachronism. It no longer has the answer to the persistent Crisis of Identity resulting from continued economic and technological backwardness and marginalization of the South in favour of the North.

Nationalism, and Socialism seemed to provide an escape route during the 40s/50s and the 60s/70s. Islamic fundamentalism became the answer when Nationalism and Socialism failed to put the world's Moslem countries on par with the Western countries.

It may take some time before variants of Islamic fundamentalism/Religious Absolutism become politically redundant and less attractive to the man in the street. Re-distribution, providing global solutions to global problems and creating opportunities for the dispossessed may help accelerate the decline of Islamic fundamentalism.

Meanwhile the writers will continue to record and to reflect. Primarily they have to rely on the international community of writers to protect them individually and to expose the pseudo-radicalism of those who want to stay in power at any price until such time as the weapons and ammunition of the camp of intolerance become obsolete and unusable. Literature has to open the horizon of the individual's mind and confront him/her with ingrained prejudices which s/he may hold. It has to show the complexity of the world and pre-empt easy solutions and simple answers. Literature will stop simple-mindedness to indulge in its ignorance.

Eventually the freedom to enjoy Peace and the freedom to enjoy all the other beautiful things in life will tip the balance in our favour. As to the immediate future, after what I have said you need to bear in mind the uncertainty principle and the second law of thermodynamics (that entropy can never decrease and almost always increases).

Ahmad Ebrahimi